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On the Notion of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT *When it comes to sustainability, there is an error we are likely to make. This error takes the form of thinking that we can first discuss “the concept of economy”, or whatever it is that may be made sustainable, ignoring specific issues of sustainability; then, in a second step we can simply add on to that initial analysis a further discussion of what kind of economies are sustainable and what kind are not. One might then simply go on to generalise this procedure thereby producing parallel treatments of sustainable politics, sustainable nourishment, sustainable partnerships, architecture, education, gardening, sports and so on. However, on my view this is a mistaken way to proceed. This way makes one liable to a serious substantive misunderstanding both of the concepts involved in this discussion and of some of the practical demands we will face if we are to try to engage seriously with the issues our current economic problems pose for us.*

*“Leopards disappearing” is grammatically
more akin to “rare illness” than
to “leopards running”.
G. E. M. Anscombe¹*

I.

In this paper I shall discuss the idea of a sustainable economy. This might seem to represent a slight deviation from the announced general topic in the title of this paper. For one might naturally assume that the idea of a sustainable economy is a *more restricted* one than the idea of sustainability *tout court*. After all, “sustainability” means that what is sustainable may last, may go on and on. And there are surely kinds of things—processes, states, objects, ideas, features—which may last or go on, each in its own way. However, it is part of what I intend to argue that this first impression is mistaken, although the

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reason it is mistaken has nothing specifically to do with the fact that the major case which comes to mind when thinking of sustainability is the sustainability of an economy or a form of economic development. The first impression could also be mistaken if there were a variety of different things that came to mind when one heard the word “sustainability”. The first impression is mistaken because it presupposes that sustainability is correctly understood as something general which can also be found in other than economic forms of sustainability and which is, therefore, independent of it. After all, one might think, even if there were no such thing as economic sustainability, there might still be other kinds of sustainability, say sustainable politics. Although the phrase “sustainable development” is often used as shorthand for “sustainable economic development”—this very addition shows that it might also be used with regard to other things than economic development. It seems natural to assume that in order to do justice to these other possible forms of sustainability, we first need a general analysis which covers the various different possible cases in which we might speak of “sustainability”. Yet, this apparently natural assumption need not be true. We may start with what is simple and say that things other than economic development may also be called “sustainable”, or “(cases of) sustainability”, provided there is a certain resemblance between all the things named in this way. That turns “sustainable economy” into a kind of paradigm. As such, it is of general importance. Therefore, the impression that I was deviating from the topic by focussing on the sustainability of the economy would be misleading. However, since the generality which is at issue in discussions of “sustainability” is not a generality of the kind one might have expected, the impression is quite understandable.

II.

So, what, then, is sustainability, or how do we use that term?

If the meaning of a word were completely determined by what people say—or what they think of primarily—when one asks them what the meaning of that word is, then there might easily be no such thing as the meaning (in the singular) of the terms “sustainability”, “sustainable development”, “sustainable economy” and so on, but at best many different meanings. For some people would say, for instance, that what they mean by “sustainability” is that marine life should not be destroyed by the fishing industry, while others would answer that even if that were to occur there would still be lots of forests, so that what is really important is that current deforestation must stop, or, even better, be reversed. Of course, there will also be people who care about both fish and forests, but some people might only care about fish, or only about forests. If that were indeed the case, then “sustainability” would have at least two meanings, if it had a meaning at all, say fish-meaning and tree-meaning. And “sustainability” would acquire a new meaning whenever someone came to care about both fish and trees or about anything else or about fish and

trees and something else and so on. Furthermore, the term would lose one of its meanings whenever no one cared anymore, in the sense of “caring” which is relevant here, about a certain kind of thing about which they used to care up to that moment. (After all, who cares about plants he doesn’t even know ever existed? Yet, what if there were no more eyeglasses and people had forgotten that there ever were means to improve bad eyesight? See below.) Also, one need not think in terms of states or processes; one may also think of procedures when thinking of sustainability: a method of using one’s income may naturally be called “sustainable”, perhaps one and the same method may be called “sustainable” and (or?) “unsustainable” depending on the kind of income one has. To sum up, the meaning of “sustainability” would be elucidated by giving a *list*. To ask for the meaning of “sustainability” would be similar to asking for a list of people with a certain name, like, say, “John”, or “Partha”, with the result, say, that there is John M. in P., John L. in O. and so on and so forth, Partha D. in C., Partha N. in J. and so on and so forth. In that case, these different “sustainabilities” would need to have as little in common, or even resemble one another as little, as all Johns need to have something in common with, or even only resemble, one another. Obviously, that is not what we are after when asking what the meaning of “sustainability” is. (“Sustainability” is not a proper name.) And yet, it may be perfectly right to say that what one means by “sustainability” is that there shall always be fish, or forests, or opera, for that matter. The conclusion, then, is that what people do when they say things like those listed above in order to answer the question of the meaning of “sustainability” is only part of what has to be taken into consideration if one wants to know what that term means. And that question is, of course, the question of what sustainability actually is.

In order to get closer to an answer to that question, it helps to realise that those who say that what they mean by “sustainability” is that there should always be fish (or forests, . . . , opera) are liable to be met with something like the following response: “Alright, if that is what you mean by ‘sustainability’, then let’s construct a concept of sustainability such that it simply means what we may also call ‘the preservation of the stock of fish’. But then, why are you calling this ‘sustainability’, instead of just calling it ‘the preservation of the stock of fish’? Isn’t it the case that what you really want is something more *general* or more fundamental? Something which connects the preservation of the stock of fish with the preservation of other things like, say, forests, landscapes, views, fresh air and water, maybe opera, and many other things as well? (After all, these are all cases of preserving something, aren’t they?) Don’t you mean a kind of procedure, a way of dealing with certain things? Don’t you, in the end, want your way of life to be preserved, to go on?” This last question points at the problem we already touched upon above with one way of expressing the generality of sustainability: there need not be anything substantive and “the same” to be found in every single element of our way of life. One might even say that our way of life is general with regard to its

elements, but the generality need not be that of a common feature. Instead, it is the generality of something which weaves all kinds of elements into a unity, like a carpet, as it were. And isn't it exactly this broadness of interwoven concerns which mirrors itself in the depth of public discontent? After all, how serious would somebody be taken if he were to claim that the stock of fish may be preserved, and everything else left as it is—including, in that case, our fishing industries?

Now, a reasonable response to this discontent could, of course, be to point to the, mildly put, unlikelihood that our way of life will be preserved, as it were, simply by its own inertia, whether we want it to be preserved or not, whether we agree with regard to sustainability or not. (Besides, not nearly everyone wants our way of life to be preserved, in particular not those who live at the bottom end of our societies. Those, however, who are at the other end might find it a bit boring.) Furthermore, why should the fact, to the extent to which it is a fact, that we want our way of life to be preserved not simply be a part of this very way of life itself? Why should resistance against change not be part of how things are? Would things be the way they are if we did not like them to be this way, to the extent that we even keep them from changing? Then, if things won't stay the way they used to be, it might belong to how they will be later that we will not want them to be the way they used to be—that is, the way they are now. Perhaps, we will want them to be the way they will be then? Isn't that almost a kind of analytic truth?

I will come back to this point, but before I do, let me pick up the point of the manifoldness of ordinary concerns. This manifoldness is, as it were, also mirrored in a rapidly increasing number of investigations into what it means to have a sustainable economy in this or that sector of the economy, with regard to this or that group of products, to choices and ways to choose, to resources, to education and so on, and in relation to ecological, social and (in a narrower sense) economic criteria. The fact that this manifold of investigations mirrors the variety of ordinary misgivings and fears comes as no surprise if these investigations are seen as highly cultivated and disciplined forms of what it means to care about something. Inasmuch as it is one thing to care about fish, and quite another thing to care about trees, or opera, these investigations differ greatly from one another. They differ so much that it sounds almost like a joke to say that what a person investigates is fish and opera, although there might very well be people who happen to be experts both in ichthyology and the art of dying while singing on stage. As before, to classify these investigations as "investigations into sustainability" is a problem to the extent to which there is, basically, no generally accepted answer to the question "what is sustainability?", although there is also no practical doubt about whether to call these investigations "investigations into sustainability".

So, to put it a bit dramatically, neither in ordinary parlance nor in scientific discourse is the situation such that everyone speaks a different language. "Sustainability" in one person's mouth is not like "red carrots" or

“music” in someone else’s mouth. However, the conceptual differences i.e., the differences in usage of the respective terms, cannot simply be removed by giving definitions, or unifying usage, on the assumption that, after all, most people more or less agree as far as the facts are concerned. There are conceptual differences, but also some conceptual points with regard to which almost everyone would agree. For instance, there is an almost universal reference to something like the famous definition given by the Brundtland commission according to which sustainable development is one which satisfies the needs of the present generation without making it the case that the needs of later generations could not in principle be met or could be met only to a very limited degree. Seen against the background of both the manifoldness of ordinary concerns and the variety of scientific discourse, the vagueness of that definition looks like a virtue. For this vagueness gives the definition the generality needed, without at the same time postulating something like a general feature for whatever has the right to be called “sustainable development”. In order for such a postulated general characteristic to be part of the definition, it could not be couched in terms of what anyone “needs” because the term “needs” is itself much too loose in its application. Some need fish, others feel a strong need for forests, still others want both, while again others do not care about either fish or forests, but would feel they had lost almost everything that made their lives meaningful if opera disappeared. So, the flipside of this virtue of vagueness of the meaning of “sustainability” is that agreement in definition starts to vanish when it comes to the question what the needs of the present or especially of future generations are.

Note, that asking this question is not usually a sign of taking the definition to be potentially misleading. For, as already indicated, the interest in sustainable development is an expression of a strong uneasiness with regard to an imagined continuation of the current way in which the economy, or even our life in general, moves. That is, one assumes the needs of future generations to be more or less the way our needs are; and then the question is how these future needs may possibly be satisfied in the light of, for instance, limited resources. Here, the problem is not only that there is hardly any reason to think that our way of life might be preserved at all (see above). The real problem starts earlier. Suppose we say that the current form of our economy does satisfy the needs of the *present* generation. That is, first, we forget, for the moment and just as an example, the huge number of people starving right now. Second, we also separate the concept of human needs from the concept of the satisfaction of human needs in such a way that it looks like a lucky coincidence that there were people who needed fish at a time when there also happened to exist methods of catching them, or that people needed heating material only when they had mastered making fire, not earlier. That a need and the possibility of satisfying it are not merely *accidentally* connected is particularly striking in the case of opera. (Leopards don’t eat sweets.) These “lucky coincidences” undercut what otherwise might be taken

to be the fundamental problem: why, if the current generation has no privileged position, should later generations be in a better position than we are in? Why then, should one not insist on future needs being changed, provided one agrees that the current economy does satisfy the current needs of consumers, yet that these needs have to be changed in order for the economy to be able to last?

Indeed, to the extent to which the economy is (conceptually) constrained by the satisfaction of human needs, although the satisfaction of the needs of consumers need not be the motive of economic agents (see below), there is no reason to believe that the conceptual separation between economy and needs, as seems to be the case in the Brundtland definition of sustainability, is of more than a very limited use. Seen in this light, the “metaphysical” conviction that the times are changing anyway, and with them human needs and the way they are satisfied or not satisfied—which is part of what it means that the times are changing—may both come as a relief and as a cause for resignation. As a relief, since future generations will take care of themselves; as a cause for resignation, since it looks as if this means that whatever we are doing, it does not matter at all. But, to repeat, the conviction that this is not true is the starting point of the real problem, not its solution.

III.

Now, whatever is meant by “sustainable economy” in particular, it looks as if a sustainable economy, taken generally, is meant to be one *kind* of economy among others or in contrast to at least one other kind. On the surface, the adjective “sustainable” characterises one kind of economy, “not sustainable” the other one. So far, so good. Yet, this does not mean that sustainability is not essential for the economy as such. If this were the case, then, indeed, we could *first* consider “the concept of ‘economy’”, and *then*, second, look for what makes an economy sustainable. But can we really, after all, know what it means to have an economy without already knowing what it means to have a sustainable economy?

If that question is asked at all, the answer usually given is: yes, we can. Put another way, the prevailing view is that one can have an economy without that economy being sustainable, full stop. “Perhaps”, some might add, “one cannot know what it is to have an economy without knowing that an economy *can* be sustainable, but that’s all we need to know”. It seems to fit with this view that sustainability appears as something one can *ask* for, as something one can *demand* or *wish* or *hope* to be a feature of an actual or future economy. If sustainability were essential for an economy, the demand (wish, . . .) would make no sense, one might think, for in this case there would either be a sustainable economy or no economy at all. Furthermore, if sustainability were essential for an economy, then one would find out what sustainability (in

economy, perhaps not in politics, or love or whatever) is all about by investigating the concept of an economy. Sustainability would just be a component, or aspect, of that concept. But does one really find out what sustainability is by a *conceptual* investigation? Must one not rather undertake some empirical investigation in order to know how to do business sustainably? For instance, must one not engage in all kinds of chemical investigations in order to find out which products, procedures, technologies and so on are suited for the economy to be sustainable, and which are not? Well, in one regard, this is correct, in another one it isn't. If one wants to know, to pick up the last example, which chemical production processes are not appropriate for a sustainable economy, a purely chemical investigation will not suffice. It must also be settled in which way which chemical properties are to be evaluated (with regard to sustainability). But either chemistry won't tell us this or by "chemistry" we already mean something more than a discipline which concerns itself with more than just the "purely" chemical. (If a chemist, due to his knowledge of the chemical structure of some stuff, warns us that it's dangerous, in which role is he speaking then?) If the producer of a certain good satisfies a need with that good, but by doing this also poisons us with that very good, is he still satisfying a need? Or is he rather "satisfying" a need? If the last wording is appropriate, is the producer then not also rather a "producer", the good rather a "good" and so on? Why don't we ask a baker whether he poisons his customers with his bread if satisfying needs has nothing to do with poisoning?

IV.

The idea that one can know what an economy is without already knowing what a sustainable economy is, this idea is too simplistic. It arises from highlighting certain linguistic phenomena, and thereby lives at the expense of other phenomena of language. Indeed, the phrase "sustainable economy" looks like other phrases, the structure of which is such that one can know what the noun means without necessarily knowing what the adjective means. There is also a similarity with regard to the fact that someone might be really concerned that the thing in question should have the property the adjective attaches to its name. I may really need some blue suede shoes—yet in this case the colour of my shoes is not related to my shoes in the same way their fabric is. (Think of shoes made of glass, whatever their colour.) Similarly, a look at the debates about sustainability—their extension, the amount of energy invested in them, the groups involved in them and so on—a look at these debates shows that concerns about sustainability are of a different kind than those about blue (suede) shoes. As already pointed out, the concerns with regard to sustainability may reach all the way up to our whole way of living—perhaps ending in revolutionary activities, accompanied by the appropriate counter-activities and so on (see below). As will be argued for here,

justice with regard to the facts is established once it is accepted that a sustainable economy is the *paradigm* of an economy, its *normal form* or however one wants to put it. (Bread is no poisoned bread, although there is poisoned bread.) Therefore, what it means, for instance, for the chemical industry to function sustainably cannot be determined without chemical investigations. But that does not mean that sustainability is a chemical property (in the narrow sense used above), as little as sustainability in the fishing industry is an ichthyologic property. Rather one might say that sustainability means different things with regard to different industries, but it also means the same everywhere. To the extent to which it means the same everywhere, we make a general mistake when thinking of “the concept of ‘economy’” in isolation from thinking about issues of sustainability.

Paying attention to sameness makes it easier to see that sustainability is age-old. What is relatively new is the catchword “sustainability”. Still a bit newer is the fact that this catchword also names, or ought to name, social relations. But it is important, in this regard, that the word does not just get a new meaning. Sustainability has always had a social side, to the extent, at any rate, that real sustainability lived up to its concept. One could almost say that the enrichment of the use of the catchword re-enacts in reality what has always been present in the concept. A similar relation holds between sustainability and the economy. As social and other aspects belong to sustainability, so sustainability itself belongs to the economy. At least this is what I suggest here.

Taken generally, sustainability is infinitely complex, and its concept tremendously vague. Therefore, in what follows, I will argue by way of examples. What follows should, therefore, only be taken to be general to the extent to which the examples extend themselves, as it were, to other cases in a natural way.

V.

Suppose Mr X needs a hook to go fishing, but doesn’t have one. He knows that his neighbour, Ms Y, has a fishhook, so he does something no one has ever done before: he asks her for the fishhook and in return he gives her a portion of his catch. (Note that I have not said “therefore, he borrowed . . .”.) Now suppose Ms Y on some later occasion asks someone else for a fishhook and shares her catch with that person. If the process repeats itself over and over again until finally it becomes a matter of course, we may say that a concrete pattern of behaviour has established itself. (And now we might use the word “therefore”.) Still later people extend the pattern to other things than just fishhooks. An abstract pattern establishes itself. At the latest when the abstract pattern has established itself we might say that (a primitive form of) the idea of credit exists. We could also say that the people had an idea of credit, that a credit system or the institution of banking exists, without, if

at all, stretching our concept of credit too far. Yet, none of the people taking part in that practice need to have a word like our “credit”, nor must anyone of them have the respective idea in the sense of being able to explain it in a such a way as it is explained, say, in finance courses. That is, we use the concept of an idea in a practical sense, as it were. What matters is that the agents show in their actions that they have this idea or, better, that the actions themselves show the idea. It is, however, not a part of the set of relevant actions that the agents be able to say what this idea consists in. The agents have, in other words, a kind of knowledge, a knowledge of *how* to conduct their affairs, but they need not have any further knowledge. This does not mean, of course, that they need not have any understanding of what it is they are doing, or that they might not be able to explain it in *any* way whatsoever. (Criticising someone until he acts “in the right way” may count as a form of explaining.)

So, by now we are concerned with a tribe which knows a (primitive) system of credit. One reason to ask for a fishhook could be that with hooks one might catch more fish compared to fishing with one’s bare hands or even with a spear. It could also be the case that without fishhooks one does not catch any fish. (Perhaps, in that area there is only deep water fish.) Suppose, now, that as long as people catch fish with their naked hands or with a spear or not at all, the natural reproduction of the fish populations is more or less constant, in any case not threatened. (This is an assumption, since the populations may also change or even disappear without human interference.) However, at the moment in which people invent angling, the situation starts to change.

Assume that the change initially is insignificant. Only when it becomes a habit to “borrow” fishhooks—which, among other things, means that some people might now angle who would otherwise never be in a position to do so—does the situation tip over. There are fewer and fewer fish. Does (a reference to) this (possible) fact belong to the idea of a system of credit based on lending fishhooks? In one regard the agents do not even need to understand that the disappearance of the fish is a consequence of their fishing with hooks instead of catching fish with their hands. They may just not realise that the fact that they catch more fish since they began using hooks may explain the disappearance of fish. (When you breathe more than you usually do, need it come to your mind that you may cause breathing air to disappear from the atmosphere?) However, if the tribe makes its living from fishing, would it not be natural for us to expect them to realise that the disappearance of the fish might be connected with their actions? (Is it nothing but a lucky coincidence that people in cold regions construct different lodgings from those in warm regions?) A change in the pattern of behaviour would be understandable, for instance a change to the effect that we would say that now they observe closed seasons.

Remember the conversion from a concrete to an abstract pattern, or idea. Would it not again be natural for us if this conversion would display some signs of the insight that waters may be fished out, as we say? The claim that

abstract patterns do not exist side by side with concrete ones would mean, then, that the idea is reflected elsewhere. The tribe could, say, allow borrowing axes only for hewing down certain kinds of trees like trees of such-and-such an age, location, size or whatever. Anyway, now, with this complex system of credit in place, one has to take all kinds of things into consideration if one wants to get a credit. To be sure, this need not be the way things proceed. Perhaps, the tribe sticks to its old patterns of fishing, without changing the rules. (The people may move into some other region.) But suppose that possible changes in the tribe's (patterns of) behaviour appear to us to be natural ones. Then would cases without any such signs of insight not be out of the ordinary?

VI.

Seen in this light, it is remarkable that investigations are made as to why and how complex cultures and civilisations simply deteriorate or even die. One reason is surely that such demises are spectacular events. But the fact that such events are spectacular is also due to the fact that they are not the rule. (If earthquakes were a normal, frequent phenomenon, a moment of quietness could be spectacular.) What needs an explanation is the fact that civilisations die. The normal process, then, is that they continue, in this or that form. That is, one wonders at these civilisations declining after having existed for so many generations. One does not wonder why, after having existed for some number of generations, a civilisation exists for two more generations (before finally . . .). This shows what counts as the normal case. Normal, with regard to such things, is that if something has existed for a certain number of generations it will continue to exist. This belongs to the nature of such things.

To make the point in a more general way, there are many things that, if they exist in accordance with the concept we have of them, exist for more than just a moment. Many things stretch out in time, as it were. They reach out into the future. For many things, and for lots of human affairs in particular, extension in time is part of their primary mode of being. If an instance of them happens to exist for a very short period only—"very short" measured by the usual extension of things of that kind—this thing is very likely in a secondary mode of existence, as if it were ill.

VII.

Our problem is also illuminated if we look at it from the point of view of evolution. For instance, if one were to say that sustainability is (not) provided for in the programme of evolution, then this thesis either says too little or nothing at all, or it is wrong.

The thesis says too little or nothing at all if by "evolution" one thinks of the theory which, for instance, explains why today's fish look or reproduce the

way they do and so on. The point is not just that men are no fish. The difference between men and fish is of another kind than the difference between, say, fish and foxes. In the sense in which evolutionary theory covers what might be called “the history of, for instance, fish (foxes, . . .)”, this theory says too little or nothing at all about humans.

Indeed, humans, as well as fish, display patterns of behaviour. But although humans need not be able to say what their respective patterns of behaviour consist in, there is something like a place for this ability within them, as it were. This is not true of fish. That is not to say that humans think and animals don’t think, and that this is where the difference lies. For it is not the case that humans think, which animals don’t do, but rather that humans do their thinking in addition to behaving in such-and-such a way, and behaviour is what animals also display. Rather, thinking is primarily measured, pre-conceived, attentive doing. Or to use Brecht’s words, thinking is subsequent to problems and prior to action, and, of course, Brecht’s point is just not that thinking is, in general, something autonomous with regard to action. No surprise, then, that patterns of human behaviour are fluid, as it were, compared to that of animals, given the well-known fluidity of thinking. No surprise, then, either, that a tribe changes some patterns of behaviour if, and because, fish are slow in arriving!

Nevertheless, human action is embedded in a certain environment as much as animal behaviour is. With regard to animals, this often becomes immediately obvious once they are not in their natural environment: they display the same old patterns of behaviour, which in turn run idle, as it were. These patterns have the content they have not least due to their being embedded in a certain environment which one calls, for instance, the “natural environment (of fish, foxes, . . .)”. Human embeddedness can be recognised by, for example, the fact that the one who learns how to fish also learns how to handle fish-hooks, rods, but also how to behave when encountering creeks, lagoons, the ocean, flies, tides, currents, light, wind, sand, whirlpools, depths and surfaces, seasons, ice, and so on and so forth. There is, then, a natural environment for us as well. But this fact, abstract as it is, and even the fact that, in countless cases, human patterns of behaviour are cultivations of primitive, as it were brute, patterns, does not mean that there is no “transition from one quality to another”.

The thesis that the idea of sustainability is external to evolution is wrong, however, if it is explicitly related to human evolution, or better: to what is called “human history”. This is the respect in which the idea of sustainability is literally age-old. It is at least as old as mankind itself. (In a sense, it is as old as Being is.) A proper economy is a sustainable economy, and here “proper” does not apply in addition to “economy”.

Yet, this does not mean that a proper economy has a form which, provided there is a certain environment, never changes. Indeed, the form may change all the time. Often it has done just that, more or less slowly and sometimes

back and forth. To the extent to which this is an essential feature, to the extent, that is, to which the concept of economy is the concept of something that might take on different forms, each of these forms already points beyond itself. Also the last form, if there is one, by being the *last* one points beyond itself, although in a different sense. So, for every form, except the last one, there is one kind of leaving its world: transformation into another form. The last form, however, just ends. Therefore, every form of a sustainable economy may either transform itself into another form or it will be the last one, i.e., the one that marks the end of sustainable economy as such. So, “sustainable economy” has one kind of ending, whereas “form of sustainable economy” has two kinds, although in one case both kinds come together in one form of sustainable economy. Moreover, these distinctions allow for the proper form of making the economy sustainable to be transformed. In either case, if (a form of) economy corresponds to its concept, then it must be something that maintains itself (or its form) for at least a certain amount of time.

In this sense, then, sustainability, in general, belongs *essentially* to that of which it is predicated. So sustainability is not simply predicated of something in the way a colour is predicated of my shoes. The fact that there have been humans for such a long period of time, compared to how long an individual human life usually lasts, is not a lucky coincidence. Neither is the fact that our world has existed for an even longer period of time. We fit, as it were, in our world, more or less. The very fact that we fit in it is what makes the world our world. To the extent to which something like economy is required in order for there to be humans—not to mention the fact that, to a large extent, human abilities, skills and so on have unfolded particularly “in the economy”, for instance due to the division of labour—an economy which is not sustainable is not simply another kind of economy. It is a *pathological* case of an economy.

Let me elucidate the less-observed part of this thought with another example. For our purpose, one might say that car manufacturers produce functioning automobiles, not just automobiles. But of course this does not mean that the car manufacturers still live up to their essence if they produce non-functioning cars. Usually, someone who tells me that he bought a new car does not expect me to ask him: “Well, a car that works or one that does not function?” Situations in which such a question is indeed appropriate—and for automobiles as well as for many other products this once was almost standardly the case—are not situations in which there is a normal and routinised production of goods. Rather, these are situations in which the production of a certain good has just commenced, or situations that are in some other way extraordinary (because of wars, natural disasters . . .).

Demanding economic sustainability means, then, demanding that the economy at issue comply with the concept of an economy (properly understood). This, in turn, does not just mean asking those involved to do something *in addition* to what they already do. It may, but it need not, and often it indeed does not mean such a thing. Given the manifold of interwoven concerns, it

may mean changing the whole framework. Moreover, it does not just mean asking economic agents, in their variety, to change their behaviour. It means asking them to live up to what they call themselves, to live up to their concept. This may, and often will, mean changing their behaviour. The point here is to get the chain of command right.

Part of this concept of an economic agent is a reference to goods that don't come into existence just by themselves, but that humans need for their lives. Now, part of what it means that humans need these things for their lives is that the production of goods guarantees that there will be future generations. For this is part of each generation's life as well. It is not the case that the satisfaction of my needs has nothing to do with the satisfaction of my children's needs, those of my fellow citizens. "Nothing", in this case, is too little. Some of my needs, one might say, are my children's needs. And sometimes these needs more than outweigh what might seem to be my own other needs (if "my needs" are construed in a highly individualist way). So much, then, is true about the above-mentioned, widely used definition, although in reverse order.

To come back to the main point of the argument, it may be the case that people are just beginning to realise that we need to *integrate* "sustainability" into our *concept* of economy, instead of *adding* it to a concept which, as such, we take to be quite in order. But as we saw, in isolation, it is just not in order. So, integrating "sustainability" into our concept of economy won't let that concept remain as it is. (We may also say that "sustainability" has always been part of the *idea* of an economy, as Hegel uses that term.) Sustainability has always been part of that complex reality which we call "economy", with some exceptions like those in connection with deteriorating or dying civilisations (see above). To the extent to which we have to integrate "sustainability" into our concept of economy, this concept has been deficient. The fact that we have not had sustainability within our concept, if this is a fact, is, then, itself a pathological phenomenon. To the extent to which nothing of what has been said so far is new, we suffer from conceptual forgetfulness. To the extent to which having forgotten something presupposes having known it, there is, however, hope—in principle, we may know it again. To the extent, finally, to which we needed an external shock to remember that sustainability belongs to the concept of economy, the forgetfulness is a sign of a pathological economy itself. For how could that economy possibly have functioned if it had been commonly understood that economy in the full, proper sense of that term is sustainable economy, although this is just what it is not, if indeed it is not? As said above, in order for us to display certain patterns of behaviour we need not be able to tell what these patterns look like, but, as also said, *some* kind of knowledge is usually in place, and it is only natural for our knowledge to change if things don't turn out the way we expected them to. For realising that things do not turn out the way we expected them to is one major way of having a problem, which in turn . . .

In the beginning I mentioned that social aspects are involved in considerations of sustainability. The preceding reflections mirrored this in more than one regard.

A first form of sociality is linked with the fact that not every generation invents and discovers everything anew. Fishing goes way back in history. Those who, today, learn how to fish learn lots of things that have been invented or discovered aeons ago and have been handed down from generation to generation. Teaching later generations belongs to the idea of sustainability, given the way we are. Yet, this does say little about the *form* of teaching (and learning).

Certain things children learn just by imitating older children and adults. Perhaps, this is not really a case of teaching. But in order to be able to imitate, children need to be able to watch or observe adults. So, the adults have to allow this. Why should that not be called “a very primitive form of education”, very much in the way in which criticising might be called a “a very primitive form of explaining” (see above)? By calling such a thing “primitive” we relate it, of course, to what are paradigms of education for us, in particular those processes which take place at schools. Now, our forms of teaching and learning are internally related to certain aims and purposes. One might imagine these purposes to be realised in different ways. For instance, everything a fisherman needs to know might be instinctive for the fisherman. (With regard to several things something slightly like this is indeed the case: some people grasp these things much faster and with much less effort than others, almost as if they have always known them.) In this sense, then, this form of sociality which is connected with teaching and learning is part of sustainability. But one might add: only accidentally so; for it might be otherwise. To some extent, we might not be the way we actually are.

In our example, however, not angling as such was in the centre of attention, but a certain form of lending fishhooks in order to participate in the catch. Yet this is a social phenomenon in itself, as it were. That it is a social phenomenon is independent of whether the respective behaviour needs to be learned from other people or not. Yet, as seen, this institution can display signs of “experiences of sustainability”.

The kinds of fishing which are current today are all more or less directly social activities. But they are so in a still different way, and once again they are connected with those experiences. They are examples of division of labour: these people produce lines, those people make rods, still other people produce fishhooks . . . all the way up to the producers of large fish trawlers which empty the seas by using pelagic long lines.

The institution of credit is not, or is not in the same way, a form of division of labour. Yet it is a social phenomenon in itself, as it were. It is independent of whether it needs to be learned from other people or not. That is, it would be a social phenomenon even if the respective patterns of behaviour would be instinctive.

Everything taken together gives us an intuition of what was mentioned at the beginning: the enormous complexity which nowadays characterises the question of sustainability. Sustainability is almost as complex as human life itself. Add dimensions of sustainability to those which are already accepted today—and who would like to deny that by building housing complexes one may leave behind something either (very) ugly or beautiful? Who would doubt that the reduction of the variety of natural kinds of plants and animals may lead to a reduction in the variety of culinary habits? So if one adds further dimensions that attach themselves naturally, as it were, then sustainability is indeed as complex as human life itself. Our species is designed for sustainability, as it were. (Seen in this light, the fact that we care about our children and grandchildren appears as that part of this design which is immediately relevant for most people.) Our overall situation is like the situation in which someone is taking part in some scientific or artistic project and by doing so, and without necessarily being aware of it, is engaged in something which stretches into eternity.

VIII.

To speak of history instead of evolution, as proposed above, also helps to treat certain current problems in a conceptually correct way. As we know, in the course of the history (!) of our planet, lots of animal species died off. Fish, for instance, need a certain water temperature to survive. What is appropriate for one kind of fish may be too cold for another kind. Yet, a certain species may be able to adapt to changes of temperature, to a certain degree. If not, that is it for that species. If the species adapts, however, it may turn into another species. Indeed, the adaptation itself may constitute the turning into another species. When we put things this way, we slide from talking about sustainability as belonging to certain kinds of animals to talking about sustainability as belonging to life itself.

Again, with regard to humans, things are more complicated. This is remarkable in the light of our ability to imagine that some day our species might also turn into another species of beings. After all, our species grew out of another, now extinct, species. But if by “sustainability” we mean something which needs to be observed in order to prevent harm for mankind we are thinking of humans as they have been for the last few hundreds of thousands of years. In this regard, that species out of which our own species evolved is of no, or only very little, interest to us. Something similar, if not the same, is true for that species which might some day evolve out of our species.

What has been said so far throws a light on the fact that some authors see an imminent danger of overemphasising sustainability. Indeed, humans are flexible, or “adaptable”, in a way that exceeds the amount of adaptability of all other higher living creatures. Human creativity is such that Nietzsche makes an important point when calling man “das noch nicht festgestellte Thier [the

not yet fixed animal]". If it is essential for animals to have a fixed nature, then this naming is actually a *contradictio in adjecto*. But it is one with wit. "Nichtfestgestellttheit" means that humans are able to change the patterns of their behaviour to an extent no other being can. But how humans behave is not just something external to them. It belongs to what, or who, they are, not just to how they are. In this sense, then, humans are indeed "festgestellt", and it is rather this "Festgestellttheit" which is not fixed, but fluid. (Herder called something like this "the dialectics of perfectibility and corruptibility".)

Look, for example, at the history of human nutrition. Over time, there was an enormous decline in the variety of basic food nourishments. Thousands of years ago, among many other things, thousands of kinds of grass were consumed, kinds that, today, often do not even exist any more. (The fields where they grew were turned into farmland and so on.) Regarding other kinds of grass we often no longer know how and when to consume them. The general point here is that our situation might indeed be less dangerous than it often is presented. (So even if several species of fish are endangered, this need not worry us with regard to our nutrition. There may, of course, be other reasons to want these species not to be exterminated. Some of them are spectacularly beautiful. Others are part of the background against which the first are so beautiful. But one may also just want the variety to be there, full stop.—But note that, although this is also true for many other kinds of things of all kinds, this does not mean that *in the end* one can only say: what counts is that someone wants this-and-this. Or better, one can, of course, say that, if one wishes, but only not in the fundamental, philosophical sense of "in the end". For in this sense it would be nonsense.—But note that if someone wanted something so urgently that he were even willing to die for it, then the difference between, as Raymond Geuss puts it in his paper in this volume, needs and wants, although still there, would become pointless with regard to the question we are interested in.) After all, why should human habits of eating, and along with them our tastes, and so on not adapt to the newly created facts? Do we really miss some of the grass our predecessors consumed 15,000 years ago, kinds of grass which most of us don't even know ever existed? Why, then, should humans miss eels hundreds of years from now?

Yet, it's not quite that easy. Understood in the usual way, we cannot, of course, miss anything that we are not even acquainted with. But perhaps we would miss something if we knew about it, even though we cannot have it since it has disappeared. (Why is Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* still so fascinating for many readers?) It would also be possible for us to miss things in the sense in which someone might suffer from a deficiency without necessarily being aware of suffering from this deficiency, but also, perhaps, without being aware of suffering at all, since he takes the miserable state he is in to be normal. Rickets, for instance, can be fought with sunlight which in turn activates vitamin D, or with cod liver oil which supplies the body with vitamin D3. Although there has almost always been rickets, descriptions of it

are only a few hundred years old. Had rickets perhaps not even been recognised as an illness before? Or should we rather say that it is an illness since we have a description of it, and in particular that it is an illness today, but was not until then? The problem here is that some kind of awareness of a phenomenon seems to be necessary for it to be an illness. Suffering is a kind of awareness, and it is only natural to expect someone who suffers to have some other kinds of awareness as well, i.e., some ideas about where his suffering comes from. Let's say, then, that something is an illness wherever and whenever humans suffer from it independently of the way in which people are furthermore aware of what is wrong with them. This way of speaking would already be adapted to speaking of "the human being". Cases like this one are important, and in this sense speaking of "the human being" is also relevant. But not all important cases are of this kind. How about opera, for instance? Is there any sense in which one might say that Europeans from the early Middle Ages suffered not only from there being no opera houses, but first of all from there not even being any opera at all? We are acquainted with operas, we have opera houses, and many people would suffer if there were no opera any more. But what if it would turn out that, in order for there to be performances of operas, certain institutions were necessary, but that these institutions were in danger due to a certain cultural policy? Is there any danger that, some day, "the human being" might miss something? Or is there only such a danger with regard to those generations for which opera is still halfway alive? Or does such a danger exist only for friends of operas, a relatively small group of people the members of which are confined to only about half a millennium in a certain small part of the world? What does sustainability mean in such a case? And what does it mean if it turned out that the culture of writing, performing, criticising etc. of operas decays as soon as practising music within families and households drops below a certain level, a level which will no longer be reached as soon as there is music all over the place and at any time due to radios, record players and so on?

This example points to some further weakness in the often-quoted definition mentioned above. This weakness consists in a lack of awareness of what might be called "determinateness by form". To use an example from Marx: hunger is hunger, but hunger satisfied with fingernails and claws is a different hunger from that satisfied with knife and fork. Form matters.

IX.

In the last of the preceding remarks, economic processes were not the main subject. However, we were concerned with things that are connected with the economy: that both parents go to work, that means of transport and communication make it easy for young people to attend universities in other cities than those their parents live in, that we have something like an industry of opera, that music is so easily accessible today and so on. As was said, the

matter is enormously complex, hardly to be compared with those small communities which made a living from fishing, aeons ago. From the point of view of the usual definition, this example also shows in which sense it is good, not a deficiency, that the debates about sustainability are numerous, divisive, and anything but perspicuous: the complexity of the matter is mirrored in the complexity of the discussions. On the other hand, the fact that there is such a rich landscape of discussions is itself a sign of an upcoming, or intensifying, problem.

One way to reduce that complexity consists in focussing on single aspects, as the reports of the Club of Rome did. Although many of the single prognoses within the first publications turned out to be wrong, the thought that many of the resources we are using are both limited and not so easily replaceable and perhaps impossible to do without has lost nothing of its importance. Or at least these resources cannot be as easily dispensed with as many take operas to be abdicable today. In this regard, the differences between our form of life and that of primitive times (or of animals' life forms) are not that great. One might, of course, imagine a situation in which, for the great majority of people alive, the destiny of opera is much more interesting than whether everyone, except perhaps opera singers, will still have enough to eat. Yet, that is simply not the way people are, and if they were that way, perhaps they would never have existed in the first place—which is the respect in which the matter is important.

But it would be too simple to say that, in terms of sustainability, the first task is to identify and secure the important things while the rest may be taken care of later. For, as already mentioned, speaking of "the human being" is of limited use. This way of speaking ignores the social forms within which the things are produced without which we cannot exist and the production of which uses resources. . . . These social forms are, as has also already been mentioned, not external to us either. It is not the case that we are humans and in addition to this some of us are teachers, others bankers, fishermen or whatever. (Philosophers are an exception, by the way.) Only within certain contexts does the appropriate answer to the question who someone is consist in giving the person's name. Biographies are detailed pictures of who someone is or was, and obviously they report what someone did, what her profession was, how she lived, etc. That's what constitutes the respective person, and not just the fact that there was a body of such-and-such a shape which needed so-and-so many calories and vitamins in order to stay alive and, in addition, was able to think.

X.

In particular, biographies report which of the events, processes and so on which the person at issue underwent were subject to the person's power, and which were not. Often, many of the events, processes and so on which

were close to the person's heart were either not at all under his or her control, or they were under control only to the extent to which it depended on the person's behaviour in situations which the individual could not prevent from arising. These situations are often connected with what above was called "institutions". Often, it is up to me whether I ask for a credit or not. But the very institution which I am using when asking for a credit is not of my making. Credit with regard to fishhooks is perhaps not yet an institution. Credit with regard to all kinds of other things perhaps is. Credit in an economy organised around money surely is an institution.

Many institutions can, in turn, take on different forms. But no one in particular needs to be responsible for the fact that a certain institution takes on one form rather than another. Not even a group of people may be able to change the form, in the sense in which one speaks of "responsibility of a group" when a professional group of fishermen goes out fishing on the open sea.

Suppose all these fishermen turned into farmers. In this case, nothing more needs to change for us than that there will be no more fish to eat and that other people too, like those working in certain restaurants, will need new jobs. But if, abruptly, there were to be no credit at all any more, perhaps everything would come to a halt. How could a single individual stop that process? Not even a group of people could do that. Some thinkers might wish to exempt perhaps very large and strategically placed groups from this judgement, but even such groups could not do that by themselves because "being strategically placed" is a concept which points beyond them. Single individuals or small groups of individuals are only able to make very large groups of people move if the overall conditions are already critical, that is, to put it crudely, if people are in a bad way. In that case, a revolution may be a way of restoring the sustainability of the economy. Yet, if it takes a revolution, then, provided the revolution is successful, the restoration of sustainability consists in changing the form of the economy or, perhaps better, it consists in allowing the economy to adopt a new form. To the extent to which revolutions arise out of miserable conditions, Walter Benjamin uses a striking image when he writes that making a revolution is like humanity reaching for the emergency brake in the train of world-history. Yet, to the extent to which revolutions allow the economy, or society in general, to adopt a new form—a form, that is, within which the old problems are not (only) solved but do not (even) arise again—to this extent, however, Benjamin also opens up a wrong alternative when representing his picture as opposed to that of Marx's famous picture according to which revolutions are locomotives of world-history. Both images may be correct. They may even presuppose one another.

XI.

However, regarding the institution of credit in an economy directed and regulated by the pursuit of profit, the permanent reproduction of the conditions

which must be satisfied in order for humans to survive and reproduce their existing abilities is usually only a by-product of acting within that institution. (This is, of course, not true with regard to those abilities which someone needs to be successful in striving for maximum profit. This is, then, a kind of intermediary link between the striving for profit and the guarantee that the conditions just mentioned are satisfied. So, "being a by-product" does not mean "being completely accidental". It is not just a lucky coincidence that people survive within a profit-oriented economy.) Indeed, it seems to be one of the axioms of modern economic thinking that when everyone strives for his or her own benefit, which is essentially measured in terms of money, the most effective satisfaction of the needs of all is attained. Some elucidate this axiom by saying that, among other things, in an ideal situation all so-called externalities would be internalised. So, provided consumers have an interest in their way of life being preserved, they will (be willing to) express this interest in monetary decisions that will render the economy sustainable. Well, the problem here is, of course, the concept of an ideal situation. In our case, the conceptual constellation is not like that in physics. If I drop a stone from a certain height, then physics tells me how long it will take until the stone reaches the ground. Yet, the prediction may turn out to be wrong. If so, in countless cases physics will also tell me about special conditions that might have obtained and that might be responsible for the difference between prediction and reality. In this case, "ideal situation" just means "simple situation", with "simple situation" meaning something like "a situation in which a rather limited number of variables is relevant". And of course physics does not just deal with simple situations in that sense. Only seldom do real bridges collapse, although sometimes they do collapse. What is the relevant counterpart in the case of economics? Historical investigations into the economy of certain countries or regions at certain points in time are often cited as counterparts to cases of physics and bridge-building, but why should the fact that these investigations have little to do with economic *theory* not be the relevant fact here? Seen in this light, the problem with this kind of "theory" is not that it may perhaps deal with certain problems like the depletion of marine life in the oceans by internalising externalities, but that it has no conceptual basis for dealing with the problem of non-renewable resources and simply presupposes that resources are non-exhaustible. As a presupposition in the sense of a "conscious supposition", this would amount to a kind of sheer obtuseness or ignorance. No, such a theory is rather blind with regard to the whole problem since its form is: whatever the resources, economic behaviour looks like this . . . That is, the theory is closer to formal logic than to physics. It is like saying "if you are using the negation in such a way that a double negation amounts to an affirmation, then you are not using it like Classical Propositional Calculus defines the negation".

Now, as far as the facts are concerned, there are almost always, almost everywhere, losers as well. They are losers by virtue of the fact that their needs

are not, or only badly, satisfied. (Whether the huge numbers of people starving at the moment count as losers depends, of course, on the extent to which the global economy lives up to its name.) There may be stages which rather confirm the axiom, and there may be stages which rather contradict it. And yet, who would really like to exchange today's form of life for that of a few thousand years ago? In this respect, romanticism is the opposite of realism.

But the problem may be even more fundamental. In countless cases, if you want to change something you need some knowledge of what is the case and what things would look like if changed. But to what extent do we really have knowledge of other economic forms? For it is certainly true that our ancestors did not have knowledge of our form of life. But are we just better off than them, full stop? For instance, doesn't the way in which we see the Native Americans who lived, say, eight hundred years ago, say more about us than about them? And is the fact, if it is a fact, that we know, or even only suspect, that our picture of their form of life may perhaps tell more about us than about them, evidence that we have as much distance from our own form of life as is necessary for us to view this form "objectively"?

One might say, and perhaps this is the best thing to say anyway, that we just start to destroy those things which deeply upset, concern and worry us—and then change the rules "as we go along". Indeed, that seems to have been the form of earlier revolutions. Yet, this form was not chosen by earlier revolutionaries. Quite to the contrary, many of them thought they knew what they were doing.

And yet, what if we act reasonably within the frame of our institutions, but by doing so bite the hand that feeds us? Maybe, the game is already over, we just don't know it. Maybe, global warming is already irrevocably on track, and all our efforts, whatever they may be, are futile and irrelevant. But if we knew, would we continue to describe our way of life the way we now still do? Wouldn't it be natural in that case for people to write about our time as we write about those decaying civilisations of antiquity? The fact that someone writes about our time in apocalyptic terms does not mean that the apocalypse is just around the corner. But it would also be too simplistic to say that the fact that someone writes in this way about our time says nothing about our time. In this case, nothing is too little.

XII.

This throws a light on what most people today explicitly connect with the catchword "sustainability" too: a certain moral attitude according to which we ought to (be prepared to) change our way of life, if there is to be justice at least with regard to future generations. And if we were afraid that the game may already be over, then we would be obliged to find out whether this actually is the case.

First, above I have said (in parentheses) that seen in a certain light the fact that we care about our children and grandchildren appears as a part of our design. If that light makes us see things the way they are, then there is something wrong with anyone who has children (and therefore possibly grandchildren) but does not care about sustainability. If it is your duty to care about your children, full stop, and if that duty is a moral one, then there is something morally wrong with you if you do not care about sustainability. If the duty is still a moral one, but one of those infamous *prima facie* duties, then it depends. But since *prima facie* duties have, as the name indicates, some (namely a *prima facie*) standing, then it is your duty, except in special circumstances. (So, the right order is not: duties are *prima facie* duties plus something else, as little as action is: trying to act plus success. In both cases, there has to be something out of the ordinary in order to make the use of the respective phrases appropriate.) To the extent to which it is also part of our design to care about the children of our brothers and sisters—somehow in the way in which we care about our grandchildren—and those of our friends, this mistake extends to cases involving them, although it gets less and less virulent as it moves away from us along the lines of family and friends.

Second, if what has been said here is correct, then sustainability cannot be reduced to intergenerational justice, if anything can be reduced to anything else at all. If anything can be reduced to anything else at all, then intergenerational justice may be reduced to sustainability. For if the concept of a generation depends on the concept of the human form of life, then it also depends on sustainability, because the human form of life, properly understood, is designed for sustainability, as it was put above. That is, there is no generation, in the proper sense, without sustainability. The last generation of our species, if there is going to be one, will not simply be a generation of humans like any other preceding generation, except that it is the last one. Either it will not live up to the concept of a human generation in that it does not see to it that there is a basis of existence for future generations—the first one of these future generations consisting of the children of the one at issue—or the very last generation will be a victim in a way in which no prior generation was. The second case may be called “a tragedy”. In the first case, you may speak of an injustice. But if you do speak that way, then you are using a paradigm of injustice instead of predicating something of this generation which in turn derives from something else. Again, then, there is some truth in the idea that sustainability is a matter of justice—only that the true order is not as it appears when it is said that sustainability can be reduced to intergenerational justice. For this way of putting it makes it look as if, from a conceptual point of view, there could also be intergenerational justice without there being sustainability, provided we find some other way of making sure that future generations may make a living. (We ruin the Earth, and this time some Aliens save us and provide us with a future for our children.) However, what is true in the claim that sustainability can be reduced to intergenerational

justice could also be retained by saying that sustainability is a certain form of justice. But given the connection of sustainability with the idea of (conditions of) a life worth living, justice may also be seen as a form of sustainability, provided that sustainability is also a form of justice. In any case, the categorical separation evaporates.

Third, even if we knew that it's already too late, this does not tell us, without qualification, what we ought to do. One may follow Luther, who says that even if he knew that the world would end tomorrow, he would still plant an apple tree today. It belongs to this paradigm that one adjusts one's actions not, or not primarily, to its consequences. But the fact that Luther is speaking in the first person also indicates that his way need not be everyone else's way. Someone who knows that the world will end soon does not necessarily make a mistake when putting down his spade. Perhaps, it depends on the "intellectual landscape"—e.g., whether this landscape is a religious one or not—within which the decision is made. Perhaps, already the question what *one* ought to do has only the *appearance* of a question.

Of course, thinking in apocalyptic dimensions is the last refuge. I may be convinced that the oceans need radical protection from being fished out even if I am convinced that empty seas will not lead to the end of our species. I may be rather relaxed in this regard. Yet, I do not make a living from fishing either. Despite my culinary habits, my situation is quite independent of the situation of those working in the fishing industry, indeed, my situation is even quite independent of the very existence of a fishing industry. Therefore, it is easy for me to talk that way. But how, then, can I ask someone in the opposite situation to think the way I do? I do not even know how I would think if I were a fisherman, although I may know what at this time, at which I am not a fisherman, I would want to think if I were a fisherman—which is also easy for me to say. To be sure, the true answer to the question whether the species is in danger or not does not depend on the specific situation of the one who is giving that answer. But why should Truth be the new Justice?

XIII.

As was mentioned above, the intellectual landscape within which questions are asked and answers given may matter. If you are a religious person, it may be easy for you to not be troubled by the end of times, because for you there basically is no such thing as the end of times. But how about a person who is not interested in sustainability at all, even though for that person there is such an end? Is this person making a moral mistake, on some level or other? I would say that he does make a mistake. And in order to elucidate this claim I might, for instance, appeal to the example of a sustainable chemical production process. Part of what it means for a chemical production process not to be sustainable may be the fact that it will cause people severe damage, as was the case in Bhopal in 1984. So, not being interested in sustainability might

amount to not being interested in one's own health or in one's chance to live as long as one might live otherwise. No doubt, many people *will* be interested in this. Indeed, a large portion of the interest in sustainability just consists in this interest. (Without such substantial interests the danger, and chance, of a revolution, as well as of counter-activities, is very much reduced.) One might even go as far as saying that it is part of our being natural creatures, as opposed to, say, numbers, that we are interested in things like these. . . . Given the way human beings usually are, they are interested in things like these, i.e., they care about sustainability. Now, what's true of human beings need not be true of me, even though I am a human being. It need not be true of someone else either, although there might be a problem if it wasn't true of any human being. (It is not obviously true that suicide is ethically forbidden. But if it were, then this would characterise a kind of ethics, or morality.) To the extent to which this is true, my saying that a person who is not interested in sustainability is making a moral mistake may amount to no more than just a part of how I happen to think about sustainability. I may say something true even though I myself do not care about sustainability at all—without this being proof or evidence that I am somehow irrational. When it comes to humans as they are today, generic judgements are of a different kind compared to generic judgements about, say, fish or trees or chemical substances. If one puts the difference in terms of rationality, then one might indeed say that it can be shown that if one knows what is at issue in discussions of sustainability, then it is irrational not to be interested in it. One could say that it is a kind of irrationality not to care about the sustainability of *X*, provided one cares for anything at all and the sustainability of *X* is a condition for the realisation of what one cares about. That is, one might not care about the preservation of fish, or of forests, or about whatever in particular. Yet there may be some kind of limit of what needs to be preserved beyond which the realisation of what one does care about will no longer be a living alternative, to use a phrase of William James's. As said at the beginning, there is a kind of "striving for generality" which expresses itself in the fact that at least some of those who primarily care about fish, or forests, or whatever, also use the word "sustainability". This distinction between that which one cares about and that which is a condition for the realisation of what one cares about may be used to set limits to morality in such a way that morality is only concerned with what one cares about. If so, one would not make a moral mistake if one did not also care about the conditions of the realisation of what is close to one's heart. However, usually the use of the word "morality" is not regulated in this way. This makes sense, since the difference between a moral and a non-moral mistake in terms of that regulation need not result in different actions. I may give some money for the preservation of forests, or vote for, or become member of, a certain party, or I may even join the revolution, although all I really care about is opera—but in order for there to be opera there need to be violins, and appropriate violins are still made of wood.

But let us not forget that the demand to be reasonable, rational, or judicious is either itself *one* demand among others—and in that case it is not yet settled what one should do whenever this demand is appropriate, since it may conflict with *other* demands. Or it is not even meant to be a demand, but merely part of what it is to be a human being at all. But if that were true, it would not show what it was meant to show. For in this case, those who did not care about sustainability would just suffer from a kind of illness. But suffering from an illness is not the same as making a mistake. But if the moralist-by-reason were drawing this analogy, he would shoot himself in the foot. For this analogy meant that one might act reasonably, rationally etc. by acting in such a way that one ends up being unreasonable, irrational etc. (see above).

In this sense, then, all one can say is what one's own stance is with regard to this matter. Besides this, one may try to show to which extent those who think they could justify why their position is the right one delude themselves. Indeed, it is only this insight which enables one to see the real moral problem here: that you have to act according to what, all things considered, you think is right, although you know you can't prove your case—and not necessarily because you are not smart enough. When it comes to such problems, there is, perhaps, no such thing as a proof. To the extent to which you have to act, you may still make a plan, and perhaps a second plan as well. But whether they will work—this may not be in our hands.

Note

1. The motto is from Anscombe's 1985 Casassa Lecture "Has mankind one soul—An angel distributed through many bodies?", in: M. Geach and L. Gormally (Eds.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 17–25 (St. Andrews: Imprint Academic). My version of the idea of evil being a privation of the good is influenced by Meister Eckhart and Peter Geach. My thanks go to the audience of a presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the University of Essex, to my colleague Max Urchs, and in particular to the members of our "Cambridger Forschungskolloquium".